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Psalm 99
Luke 9:28-43

“Experience-Listen-Follow”

There are personal experiences that change everything.

Ollie Dixon is a minister in Chicago. Before she became a minister, she was a police officer. A Chicago cop assigned to an impoverished district with many churches and at least as many liquor stores.

Every day, it seemed Officer Dixon was called to the site of a murder, almost always drug related. "Every day I was leaning over a young black body lying on the sidewalk; everyday seeing mothers weeping over their dying sons," is the way she puts it. And then it came close. Her young nephew, father of a newborn baby, unemployed, selling drugs to feed his wife and child, was killed.

Ollie Dixon had enough, had **too** much, and she prayed, "Lord, there must be something we can do." And she exchanged her police uniform for a clerical collar.

There are life-changing experiences, experiences that forever change the way we see ourselves, our lives, our purpose. Sometimes they happen on a mountaintop with sun rising and the air clear and clean, and sometimes they happen in the darkest valley in the midst of despair and futility. And sometimes our perspective profoundly changes as we grieve for the future of our church – gasping for breath, trying to maintain a healthy pulse ... anxious to survive.

What those experiences have in common, wherever and whenever they happen, is that they take us out of ourselves for a brief moment and remind us of a dimension of life that is beyond the everyday, beyond our sense of touch and sight and hearing. **What those experiences have in common, whether it is watching a young boy die or an infant being born, or a church aching to be restored, is that they remind us of the mystery and the supreme power of God.**

Speaking of life-changing experiences ... One time Jesus takes his closest friends, Peter, James and John, on a hike up a mountain. On the mountain something happens that defies description—Jesus' clothing becomes dazzling white, his face changes. Long-time deceased Moses and Elijah appear and talk to him about his death. A cloud descends, and the three friends are terrified. And they hear a voice: "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him."

It was such an awesome experience that they never even tried to tell anyone about it who wasn't there.

Strange, outlandish stories like that, make us uncomfortable every time we hear them. But they are in the Bible to remind us of a basic affirmation of faith that there is more to reality than we can see, touch, or imagine.

They are reminders of that basic biblical truth, that there is a God who is not one of us, a God who is "holy"—which means "other"—a God whose "otherness" stands over and above our humanity.

Those stories are reminders that there is a "Thou" who is not me; and that we are not alone in the universe, but are somehow intended by, created by, loved by, pursued by, an "other" whom we call God.

These mysterious/mind-blowing/heart-expanding stories are in the Bible to warn us against assuming too much about God, assuming we can understand everything there is to understand about God. For instance, assuming that God is limited by the boundaries of our understanding. Assuming that God is limited by declining numbers, and flagging spirits and worn-out imaginations.

I'm reminded of a brilliant book and its memorable title *Your God Is Too Small*, written by the late J. B. Phillips, a British theologian and New Testament scholar. Phillips observed, "Many men and women today are living, often without any faith in God at all. . . . not because they are wicked or selfish or godless, but because they have not found with their adult minds a God big enough to 'fit in with' the new science" ... and spirited imaginations. (*Your God Is Too Small*, p.8). Rather, they know only a god who has been whittled-down to human size by the church and common religious culture. **AND THAT GOD IS TOO SMALL**, Phillips insists.

And every time I read and consider this mysterious incident of transfiguration—of Jesus on the mountain with his friends,

experiencing something beyond their ability to describe, beyond their ability to comprehend—I remind myself that my own mind, and the intelligence and power of the smartest of us, does not set ultimate limits.

“They never spoke of it again.” Luke tells us, “They kept silent and told no one what they had seen.”

You see, they were not seeking bragging points about their personal familiarity with the Almighty. The point is not to talk about and try to explain and share our deepest religious experiences. That’s not what those experiences are for. God gives us occasional experiences of transcendence, I believe, to get our attention, and then, to change us. The real question is not about the experience: What really happened? Was it authentic? The real question is what will we do and who will we be when we come down from the mountain.

I love Peter. Peter tries to manage everything, bring everything under control. Peter’s a go-to person. After the mysterious experience on the mountain, Peter says, “Let’s build. Let’s memorialize the moment. Let’s honor forever what happened up here. Let’s make permanent and accessible the revelation we have experienced. Let’s build three booths.”

And Jesus doesn’t even acknowledge the suggestion. Instead Jesus leads them down from the mountaintop to the valley where there are people waiting, where life is being threatened, where there is a dreadfully sick boy and his desperate father. Down the mountain ... where there are fresh opportunities to minister.

And I think in the silence of their descent down the mountain, stumbling along behind Jesus, the three of them began to gain perspective on what the experience was for them. For them, for a moment, they caught sight of the divine ... of God.

So their task, from that time forward, was not to keep talking about what happened up there on the mountain, and how wonderful it was and maybe we should write a creed that everybody gets to share about the truth we have experienced, and build three little shrines to mark the spot to which others can travel for their own transfiguration pilgrimage.

No, wisely, they said nothing. “Listen to him,” the voice said. Listen to what he says. Watch what he does. Listen and watch as Jesus walks down from the mountain into the valley of human need and there

touches humanity in the form of a sick child and a desperate father. Listen and watch as he describes and then lives out a whole new way to be human and to be faithful ... the way of self-giving love.

Listen as Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes this child welcomes me."

Listen as he tells about an outcast who stops by the roadside to bind up the wounds of his enemy and about a father who runs down the road and opens his arms to welcome his son home.

Listen as he says, "Love your enemy—love one another."

Listen as he says, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Listen and watch as he gives his life away for others.

Listen as he says, "Do not be afraid little flock" and "Today you will be with me in paradise." And "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

Listen as he says, the one who saves life will lose it and the one who loses life for my sake will find it."

I believe God comes to us in experiences we cannot always understand and can rarely explain to others.

I believe God gives us occasional moments of clarity, or tantalizing moments of near clarity.

I do not believe they are the same for all of us.

I do not believe it is particularly important to talk about them and try to share them with others.

I do not believe they happen often.

I do not believe God wants us to keep returning to the mountain, to build a memorial.

I believe that what God wants us to know deeply in our hearts and minds is that we are not alone, that there is a reality bigger than our reality and that in that reality we will find the meaning and purpose of our lives.

I believe God wants us to listen to God's Son, and to follow him ... to follow him down from the mountain, to life, our own ordinary lives, and here, as nurses and teachers, professors and administrators, retired or semi-retired, session members and deacons ... **to live as Jesus' people, to give our lives for others, to love without reservation. To trust God.**

Officer Ollie Dixon watched as poverty and drugs and guns combined to take the lives of young men and women in her neighborhood. Weary of looking at young bodies every day and weeping mothers, she prayed, "Lord, there must be something we can do." And she had an epiphany, a moment of transfiguration, an experience on the mountain.

"We have all these churches," she reasoned, "right here in in the district where she was living and working. Over two hundred churches, all locked up tight to protect themselves from the hoodlums and gang bangers and drug dealers." "Open your doors," she preaches. "Open your doors and let the community in. Let the children come. Open your doors and come out and walk the neighborhood streets." And yes, certainly it is by more than her efforts, and it has been over the course of some ten years, but there is less violence and fewer homicides in those precincts and there is something new. **There is hope.**

The mandate is clear, I think. For the church, and for us as individuals, the mountaintop may be right here, as we experience together God's goodness and presence in beautiful music, and a lovely sanctuary and a warm fellowship and well-reasoned speech.

And for the church, here and everywhere, and for each one of us, as Ollie Dixon realized, the call is to follow the Lord down from the mountain into the valley of human need.

And so for you and me, Catch the rhythm, there. Moments of inspiration and clarity and deeply felt spiritual experience. And then, following Jesus, back into the life we are given to live, there finding meaning and purpose. Healing and hope.

This is my Son . . . listen to him. Follow him.